



A Taste of the Wilds

This summer when my 78-year-old mother told me she wanted to paddle a canoe this fall, I thought maybe she was a little bit crazy. I had thought perhaps we were done with such trips, owing to her heart issues and fragile bones, not to mention the knowledge that if she gets cut she will bleed heavily. She moves more stiffly than she used to, and sometimes her balance is a little sketchy. Are these not things to trigger a bit of worry on the part of a dutiful daughter? And were we forgetting the tricky back of this 53-year-old Sherpa, the back that failed me so badly just this past winter? Carrying a canoe, even a light one, requires an element of strength, and taking your aging mother into the wilds an

element of I wasn't quite sure what.

But there are times when maybe you should just open your heart and travel light, for we walk by faith, not by sight. I decided we would find a way to do this. I set aside my fears, and did not even load my pack with extra clothing or Band-Aids. Besides, I am a sucker for water, especially in the rock country. Like my Mom, I absolutely love poking around in a canoe in the fall of the year, when the woods is on fire with color. And so we planned a trip into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness on the Chippewa's sister forest, the Superior.

I decided that this trip would be less about endurance and more about a quieter pace, and so I set the rule that there would be no portaging; at least not for me. If Mom wanted to pick up a canoe and take off across country, I guess I could try to keep up. Not wanting to ruin a trip with screaming back pain, I determined that we would paddle the kinds of lakes that you can drive up to, and the only carrying would be the short kind that involves pulling the canoe off the top of your car and over to the landing. I also thought that we should spend our nights down on the shore of Lake Superior, so that if we discovered we did not want to work too hard, we would have plenty of other things to do. Oh ye of little faith, building a back-up plan.

You never know when you set the dates for a fall trip just what conditions you will run into. Blessed from above, we had not only uncommonly mild weather, but peak fall colors. Like bookends, the departure and return legs of the drive down and back up Highway 38 on the Chippewa National Forest involved the most spectacular leaves, with the greens of the spruces and the balsams offsetting the yellows and reds of the northern hardwoods that line this route.

We paused at Hawk Ridge in Duluth to catch a bit of the raptor migration. Thousands of raptors and other birds pass along the ridge of the shore of Lake Superior on their way further south. The best viewing of the hawks can be had between about 10 and 2 on fall days that have westerly or southerly winds. In a good afternoon you can see many more of these often elusive birds than the entire rest of the year. The short time we lingered, we saw bald eagles, turkey vultures, northern goshawks, broad-winged hawks, American kestrels, and peregrine falcons. I laughed to see the sharp-shinned hawks hitting the mock owls that are set up near the counting station. It was fun to see the enthusiasm of the birders gathered to watch this amazing annual passage. Nature lovers.

Luxury canoeing is a good way to go when you reach a certain stage in life, or even just because you like to do things this way. It involves sleeping in a warm, comfy bed, with access to a nice, hot shower. Perhaps even a pool in which to swim out the kinks, and maybe a hot-tub for soaking after a strenuous paddle. You might start your day with a little something from the local bistro, and end it with dinner out, carrying a picnic lunch for in between when you are out in your boat. You should make getting to and from your paddling destination a part of the trip, especially when the leaves are lovely and the roads interesting.

As luck would have it, my bed along the shore of the Big Lake was the kind that folds out of a couch. I had thought maybe they had improved the technology of such things, but I found out you can still feel the metal cross pieces beneath you. The bonus of being awake much of the night in such circumstances turns out to be the stars shining in the night sky visible through the big, glass door. The door which you have left ajar in order to listen to the booming of the rollers coming on such big water. And before dawn you can watch the bats making their way back to their warm roosts in the attic. Mine were magical accommodations.

After a couple of days of paddling, we were ready to spend a day driving Honeymooner's Trail, an amazing blend of colorful trees, lichens, rocks, and water. Some of the most diverse lichen communities in North America are found in northeastern Minnesota. A stop at Minnesota's biggest maple syrup producer was a given. My husband happened to call just when Mom and I were sitting down to a piece of pie in town to fortify ourselves for a little shopping. He said, "That doesn't sound like canoeing". No, but we paddled hard the day before. Besides, what rules are there exactly when you are on vacation?

On one of our final mornings, I padded a driftwood log on the beach with a blanket, and beckoned to my mother to join me for coffee on the shore. There it was we watched the sun climb up, out of the water, bringing that special glow of dawn to all around us. A morning person, I hope I shall never tire of watching the light grow.



There is more than one way to visit the special places we hold dear. We need to do those things that feed our souls and nourish our essence. A taste of the wild country can take you there. This trip was one of the best I've ever had, and I think the simplicity of the formula was the key to success. Sleep beside the big water; paddle on the little water; watch for the sun. Thanks, Mom.

